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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the pretend play behavior of 16 boys and girls aged 12 and 18 months. Each child was presented a standard set of stimulus materials during two home visits. For each of three 10-minute episodes, the child's pretend activities were recorded by means of a coded observation schedule. During episode 1 the child played alone, during episode 2 the child played alone or with the mother (with order reversed across visits), and during episode 3 the child played alone. Analysis of the data suggested that pretending with age, and that mothers enhanced the play of older girls. A developmental progression from self-directed to other-directed activities was also indicated. Analysis of sex differences showed that differences in pretending may appear as early as 12 months of age and that girls are involved more than boys in other-directed nurturing activities and in the use of representations of animate objects. The effect of the mothers on pretend behaviors was examined and it is suggested that although sex differences in overall level of pretending may stem from direct adult interventions, the selective maternal enhancement of sex stereotyped patterns was not found. The results suggest that in a semi-naturalistic situation, mothers differentially influence the tendency of a child to engage in pretend play behaviors, not the content of the pretend behavior. (GO)

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Pretend Play: Sex Differences and Maternal Influences Between 12 and 18 Months

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ABSTRACT

The pretend play of 12- and 18-month old boys and girls was observed when they played alone and with their mothers. Pretending increased with age and mothers enhanced the play of older girls. Analysis of activities and materials revealed sex differences favoring the girls in other-directed nurturing activities, and in the use of representations of animate objects. Age effects indicated a developmental progression from self-directed to other-directed activities. The results indicate that in a semi-naturalistic situation, mothers differentially influenced the tendency to pretend, rather than the content of pretend.

Pretend Play: Sex Differences and Maternal Influences Between 12 and 18 Months

Recent research has suggested that children's toy preferences and pretend behaviors may reflect early sex-role socialization (Goldberg & Lewis, 1969; Messer & Lewis, 1972; Fein & Robertson, 1974). Studies of doll play in nursery school children show striking differences favoring girls (Bach, 1945; Pintler, Phillips & Sears, 1946; McDowell, 1937). By 26 months pretend activities are enhanced in girls and depressed in boys (Fein & Robertson, 1974). Apparently, sex-typing at these ages appears with respect to objects and activities generally considered feminine. However, doll play activities are also those which dominate the pretend activities of young children. Since pretend play first occurs during the second year, whether sex-typing is evident during its early stages is of considerable interest.

Early sex differences in pretend play might stem from several sources. On the one hand, children might selectively imitate parental roles and play would thus reflect children's prior life experiences. On the other, sex-typed play patterns might be promoted by the direct intervention of parents in children's ongoing play. The hypothesis of direct intervention is more consistent with the cognitive capacities of children during the second year. The present study was a preliminary semi-naturalistic investigation of whether mothers encourage sex differentiated patterns in children's ongoing play during the early formative stages of pretend.

Method

Subjects

Sixteen Caucasian boys and girls at two age levels (12 and 18 months) selected from hospital birth records participated in the study. The sample was predominantly middle class: three fathers were professionals and the remainder were either small business entrepreneurs or semi-skilled craftsmen.

Procedure

The repeated measures design involved two visits to the child's home and three 10 minute episodes during each visit. During Episode 1 the children played alone; during Episode 2 they either played alone (No Mother) or with their mothers (With Mother) with order balanced over visits; during Episode 3 they played alone.

A set of approximately 50 toys and household objects housed in two suitcases was presented in a standard arrangement at the beginning of each episode. The suitcases contained the following materials: cups (coffee mug, toy cup), spoons (plastic teaspoon, metal tablespoon), toy baby bottles (one large, one small), pot and cover, cereal bowl, dolls (one large, one small), plush cat, hats (2 orange felt hats, construction hat, doll size engineer's hat), handkerchief, hair brush, tooth brush, doll size chair, plastic toy suitcase, car, truck, plastic doll carriage, baby rattle, whistle, plastic blocks (2), plastic clothes pins (8), balls (4), nesting bowls (2), pop beads, ring-pole stack toy (2), plastic pail, plastic storage bottle, clear plastic tube, whisk, chain lock, truck and top.

One female <u>I</u> interviewed the mother (who sat between the suitcases) during No Mother episodes. The other female <u>E</u> tracked orally on a tape recorder the object the child was using and his activity coded according

to a previously established observational language of approximately 50 verbs to describe the child's object activities (observer agreement ranged from 70% to 88%). Behaviors were coded "pretend" if they (1) involved treating an inanimate object as if it were animate (feeding a doll), (2) resembled functional activities but occurred in the absence of necessary materials (stirring, pouring, drinking, or spooning "food" out of empty cup), (3) were not carried through to their usual outcome, or (4) were typically performed by others (brushing own or other's hair). Two measures were taken for each play episode: (1) Pretend activity was the sum of all those behaviors coded "pretend" occurring within each 10-minute episde. (2) Total activity was the frequency of the child's object activities (including pretend) in which there was either a change in an activity or a change in an object. This measure served as a baseline of activity level against which to assess the specific effects of experimental variables on pretend.

Results

A preliminary examination of the data failed to reveal order effects and so this factor was collapsed in subsequent analyses. A repeated measures analysis of variance for total activity scores revealed that activity declined over episodes ($p = .05$). No other main effects or interactions were significant. The correlation between Total Activity and Pretend Activity scores was .38 ($p < .10$).

Pretend. Error variance from the multifactor analysis of variance with repeated measures was used to estimate the reliability of pretend activities (Winer, 1962). Pretend proved to be highly stable over episodes ($r = .886$, $p < .01$), over visits ($r = .611$, $p < .05$) and over visits and episodes ($r = .821$, $p < .01$).

The pretend scores of the older children increased while that of the

younger children decreased over episodes, $F(2/24) = 4.023$, $p = .032$. As shown in Table 1, the increase of the older children reflects the enhanced pretending of the older girls with their mothers during Episode 2 which persisted during Episode 3. The four way interaction of age, sex, mother condition and episode was significant, $F(2/24) = 3.455$, $p = .048$. During Episode 2, the older girls pretended more than the older boys, the younger boys, and the younger girls ($p < .01$, $p < .01$, and $p < .06$, respectively). These differences were maintained during Episode 3 ($p < .01$, $p < .01$, and $p < .025$, respectively).

Nurturing-social activities. Since previous research indicates that between 20 and 26 months sex differences in pretending appear in feminine stereotyped object activities, internal analyses were performed to assess whether this effect would appear in younger children and whether it would be related to the form and content of pretend. Separate analyses were performed on nurturing-social activities (such as feeding, sleeping, or affectional gestures). Girls engaged in more nurturing activities than did boys, $F(1/12) = 5.563$, $p = .037$. Although the scores of the girls were considerably elevated in the mother play conditions, no other main effects or interactions were significant. At 12 months, nurturing activities accounted for 74% of all pretending, and at 18 months, it accounted for 70% of all pretending.

Some nurturing activities can be directed either toward the self (for example, drinking out of an empty cup) or toward an "other" (for example, feeding mother or a doll with an empty cup). Nurturing activities were divided into the categories of self-directed and other-directed (excluding those which could only be directed toward others, such as hugging a doll).

Analysis of self-directed activities failed to reveal significant main effects or interactions. However, the analysis of other-directed activities revealed that girls nurtured others more often than boys, $F(1/12) = 5.408$, $p = .039$ and older children more often than younger children, $F(1/12) = 4.495$, $p = .056$. Although the nurturing-other activities of the girls were elevated in mother condition, these effects were not significant. The other-directed activities of the girls increased over episodes, whereas the nurturing-other activities of the boys decreased over episodes, $F(2/12) = 5.482$, $p = .011$ (see Table 2). Sex differences did not appear during the first 10 minutes of play, but were significant over subsequent periods ($p < .05$).

Table 2 about here

At 12 months, self-directed activities accounted for 61% of nurturing pretends, and nurturing-other activities accounted for 18% of nurturing pretends. By 18 months nurturing activities were about equally divided between nurturing-self (39%) and nurturing-other (40%).

Materials. The materials used in pretend were divided into tools (cups, spoons, brushes, comb, clothespins, and so forth), animate representations (dolls, plush cat), and vehicles (car, truck, doll carriage). These categories accounted for 92% of the objects used in pretending. To correct for heterogeneity of variance, analyses were performed on log transformed frequencies ($X' = \text{Log } .10 + X$). (1) Tools. Analyses of tools failed to reveal significant main effect or interactions. (2) Animate representations. Objects in this category were used more by older than by younger children, $F(1/12) = 5.279$, $p = .041$ and more by girls than by boys, $F(1/12) = 10.366$, $p = .008$. No other main effects or interactions were significant. (3) Vehicles.

Girls showed a striking increase with age, whereas boys declined slightly, $F(1/12) = 6.098$, $p < .05$. However, analyses performed on the car and truck (eliminating the doll carriage) failed to reveal significant main effects or interactions.

Conclusions

Findings of the present study indicate that sex differences in pretending may appear as early as 12 months of age. Differences appeared for female stereotyped activities (nurturing others) and for particular objects (dolls, doll carriage). The analysis of self-directed and other-directed activities revealed a developmental progression: self-directed activities were the dominant form of pretending at 12 months and did not increase with age. In contrast, other-directed activities were infrequent at 12 months and increased between 12 and 18 months. Other-directed activities revealed sex differences, whereas self-directed activities did not. These activities were not influenced by mother-no mother conditions. If children's nurturing-other activities reflect behaviors typically performed by adults, the findings indicate that children begin to render simple role transformations between 12 and 18 months of age. Age effects found in children's use of animate object representations also suggest that by this age children may be able to code some attributes of interactive social roles. Yet it is unlikely that children between 12 and 18 months of age have the necessary cognitive capacities to selectively model parental roles. Although the present findings indicate that sex differences in the overall level of pretending may stem from direct adult interventions, selective maternal enhancement of particular sex-stereotyped patterns was not found. In a semi-naturalistic situation, mothers differentially influenced a general tendency to pretend, rather than the particular content of pretend. The problem of examining sources of early sex-typing which are consistent with children's cognitive capacities thus remains.

TABLE 1

THE FREQUENCY OF PRETEND ACTIVITIES FOR

EPISODES WITH MOTHER AND NO MOTHER CONDITIONS

MOTHER CONDITION AGE AND SEX	Episode 1	Episode 2	Episode 3
With Mother, Boys:			
12 Months.....	2.8	2.0	3.8
18 Months.....	7.5	4.0	5.5
With Mother, Girls:			
12 Months.....	9.0	9.0	8.3
18 Months.....	10.8	21.3	23.0
No Mother, Boys:			
12 Months.....	7.3	5.3	1.0
18 Months.....	2.5	7.8	9.8
No Mother, Girls:			
12 Months.....	4.0	7.8	2.0
18 Months.....	11.8	7.0	11.8

TABLE 2

MEAN FREQUENCIES FOR NURTURING-OTHER:

SEX × EPISODE INTERACTION

	Episodes		
	I	II	III
Boys.....	1.06	.44	.25
Girls.....	1.50	4.25	3.06